International Journal of Communication 15(2021), 1286–1308 1932–8036/20210005

Selective Belief: How Partisanship Drives Belief in Misinformation

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The use of disinformation in political campaigns is not a new phenomenon, but the issue has acquired renewed attention because digital media makes it relatively easier to spread disinformation. Through a cross-sectional survey (N = 1,820) on the 2019 Indonesian national elections, we analyze the relationship among belief in misinformation, social media use, and partisanship. The analysis shows that although the political use of social media is not associated with belief in misinformation, partisanship is strongly associated with belief in various types of misinformation, depending on whether their own candidate or the opposing candidate is targeted. The findings are interpreted through the concept of selective belief. This study contributes to theoretical debates on the association among belief in misinformation, social media use, and partisanship, and addresses the role of disinformation in electoral politics in Indonesia.

Keywords: misinformation, campaign, selective belief, elections, public opinion, Indonesia

Disinformation has emerged as a major problem for electoral democracies. With the rise of multiple channels of communications, such as social media, blogs, and mobile phone apps, the spread of disinformation has become more rapid and more targeted. Research suggests that misinformation spreads much faster than the facts, particularly in the domain of politics (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This should be a concern for democracy because political beliefs that are based on misinformation may affect citizens' electoral judgement. The potential of social media to be used for political propaganda has been noted in several earlier studies (Howard, 2006; Hwang, Pearce, & Nanis, 2012), especially for populist leaders (Curato, 2017; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Postill, 2018; Schroeder, 2018). Although social media is often blamed for presenting users with falsehoods and misinformation, there is conflicting evidence on whether social media use affects one's belief in misinformation. Instead of social media use in general, the

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Date submitted: 2020–05–14

[1] We would like to thank Annisa Beta and Hichang Cho for providing comments in an earlier draft of this article.

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use of social media for political purposes has been found to be associated with belief in misinformation (Koc-Michalska, Bimber, Gomez, Jenkins, & Boulianne, 2020).

In a media-saturated environment, it is difficult to selectively avoid information. However, the literature on selective exposure argues that people often seek opinions that reinforce their beliefs and avoid information that challenges their views (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). In addition, the selective sharing literature shows that people tend to share information online that is consistent with their beliefs and viewpoints (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Jacobson, Myung, & Johnson, 2016; Shin & Thorson, 2017). We instead advance the concept of selective belief, in which people accept or reject information based on their partisan beliefs. The concept of selective belief is important because partisanship is attributed to be associated with active participation online (Kalogeropoulos, Negredo, Picone, & Nielsen, 2017; Kim, 2016; Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012) and sharing fake news online (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). The literature on partisan-motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014) has established the link between the interpretation of information and party commitment. In the age of misinformation, these concepts need to be disentangled to explain a specific phenomenon with contextual grounding in order to provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between exposure to (mis)information and belief. We propose the concept of selective belief to explain why people believe in misinformation.

The empirical evidence for this article comes from a cross-sectional national survey conducted during the 2019 national election in Indonesia.[2] Although disinformation spread through social media has been continuously expanding in Indonesia, there is limited empirical evidence on how such disinformation has been playing a role and influencing Indonesian politics (for exceptions, see Ahmad & Popa, 2014; Johansson, 2016; Lim, 2017). Therefore, this article not only contributes to the theoretical debates on the association among belief in misinformation, social media, and partisanship, but also fills the gap in the existing literature regarding the role of disinformation in electoral politics in Indonesia. We first discuss the theoretical literature and the context of the study, and then the method. Following this discussion, we analyze the results and offer a conclusion.

Disinformation in Political Campaigns

The use of disinformation in political campaigns is not a new phenomenon. However, the issue has acquired renewed attention with the rise of digital media, which has made it relatively easier to spread disinformation. The debates over online disinformation intensified after Brexit in 2015 and Donald Trump's election in 2016, and they have been the subject of many academic and media debates since then (Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018). Systematic studies of the role of computational propaganda have been undertaken for elections in various parts of the world (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Studies have highlighted the rising global concern of "fake news" (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094), though the magnitude of the effect of fake news on election outcomes has been the subject of academic debates (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson, & Lazer, 2019). Although there has been a growing use of the term

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[2] This was the first time that Indonesia held general elections simultaneously with presidential and legislative elections. Previously, presidential elections were held three months after legislative elections.

fake news, academics have raised concerns about this umbrella term because of its conceptual ambiguity and misuse by political actors (Keller, Schoch, Stier, & Yang, 2020).

We can distinguish between four types of information disorder as identified in the literature. In the first type, disinformation refers to deliberate attempts to manipulate public opinion through the systematic use of false information; the intention for deception is an important element of disinformation and may cause public harm (Jack, 2017). The second type is propaganda, which is the intentional manipulation of public opinion, but it is not necessarily based on false information (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012); propaganda often operates through a selective presentation of facts with emotional appeal and can also be used for positive campaigns (Curnalia, 2005). In the third type, misinformation occurs through the unintentional spread of false information (Barfar, 2019). The last type is "fake news," which is the deliberate dissemination of news stories that lack verification of facts, sources, and evidence to prove the accuracy of content (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018); fabrication is an important element of fake news and is often used for financial or ideological gains (Bronstein, Pennycook, Bear, Rand, & Cannon, 2019; Lazer et al., 2018). Because of the subtle differences, *disinformation* in this article is used to refer to the deliberate and strategic spread of information to manipulate public opinion and could involve the use of propaganda, rumors, misinformation, and fake news. While we are mindful of these subtle differences, we use these four terms interchangeably.

In the context of elections, disinformation campaigns often target individual candidates and are used to delegitimize their chances of electoral success. Disinformation campaigns are often organized efforts that involve tactics such as the use of rumors, fake news, selective presentation of facts, and slanted political stories; they also use various channels of communication, including both online and offline platforms, as well as grassroots networks (Howard et al., 2018; see also Das & Schroeder, 2020). The integration of offline and online channels of communication to run disinformation campaigns becomes imperative in a country where the majority of people still depend on offline consumption of information. In Indonesia, although the Internet penetration rate is increasing continually, reaching more than 64% of the national population in 2019, people continue to use offline communication such as newspapers and television.

Belief in Misinformation and Social Media Use

Belief in misinformation can be driven by multiple factors. As social media platforms gained popularity, research started to focus on the extent to which platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enable the spread of misinformation (Shin, Jian, Driscoll, & Bar, 2018) and if partisan differences are associated with believing in various types of misinformation. People from across the political spectrum have been found to fall for misinformation (Harper & Baguley, 2019), though some studies have shown that conservatives and liberals have different patterns of information search and evaluation, leading to differences in heuristic judgments (see Kahan, 2013). In the political domain, thus, the motivation to believe in misinformation cannot be attributed to any particular political ideology.

Studies have tried to separate the effects of exposure to fake news versus belief in fake news. For instance, Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand (2018) found that prior exposure to fake news is associated with subsequent belief in fake news; however, this fails to explain the huge difference between people regularly exposed to fake news and those who believe it (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In terms of the link between

social media use and exposure to misinformation, the findings are mixed, with some studies reporting a link (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Silverman, 2016) and other studies contesting the connection (Allen, Howland, Mobius, Rothschild, & Watts, 2020). In their study of the 2016 U.S. election, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that social media referrals "accounted for a small share of traffic on mainstream news sites, but a much larger share for fake news sites" (p. 212). Although their study found that fake news consumption did not have an impact on influencing the election outcome, they cautioned against generalizing their results because they only measured exposure to, and not belief in, fake news.

One could be exposed to misinformation through social media, but belief in misinformation may not simply be a product of exposure. Belief is a more complex phenomenon than exposure and is driven by multiple factors, including internal factors, such as cognitive biases, and external factors, such as exposure to media messages (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). In yet another study, Koc-Michalska and colleagues (2020) examined what members of the public in three countries believe about their own exposure to falsehoods in the news and found that political use of social media is associated with belief in exposure to falsehoods. Although this is an important finding, the measure was not about whether respondents believed in misinformation, but about whether they believed that they had been exposed to misinformation. Because there have been contradictory findings with respect to social media use and belief in misinformation, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent is social media use (on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp) for political purposes associated with belief in misinformation?

Belief in Misinformation and Partisanship

The underlying mechanisms of believing in misinformation can be complex and depend on contextual factors. At the individual level, confirmation bias, a process in which one seeks information that supports one's prior beliefs or expectations, could help explain why one believes misinformation (for details, see Nickerson, 1998). The existence of a confirmation bias in political online information is supported by Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin (2020). Academic debates continue over whether confirmation bias is driven by partisanship. Stroud (2008) suggests that there is an association between people's political beliefs and their media exposure; partisans are more likely to select messages that are congruent with their bias (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). The study of selective exposure dates back to the pre-Internet era, but the subject has acquired renewed attention in the changed media environment because social media makes it easier to select and filter messages (Mutz, 2006). In the case of selective exposure literature, people's selection of information on an issue becomes an important determinant of bias or exposure to diverse information.

In the domain of engagement with news, research suggests that partisans are more likely to share information and comment on news that is consistent with their in-group belief (Shin & Thorson, 2017). The sharing of ideologically consistent information instead of information from the opposing side has been established in various studies (Barberá et al., 2015; Jacobson et al., 2016. These studies show that partisans' selective exposure and selective sharing behaviors are driven by their partisan goals. The literature from selective exposure, however, is contested and reveals that people do get exposed to opinion-challenging information in order to gain insights into opposing ideas (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman,

2012; Shin & Thorson, 2017). But the literature on selective sharing is more robust and consistent, showing a strong tendency among people to share information online that is consistent with their beliefs. Research also suggests that people hold contradictory opinions about facts based on their party affiliation, leading to partisan belief gaps (Hindman, 2009). Partisans are often motivated by ideological goals, and when confronted with messages contradicting their belief, they are most likely to disregard them. Drawing on the literature on selective exposure and selective sharing, we argue that there is selective belief among partisans when it comes to misinformation. Unlike the case of selective exposure, people are exposed to opinion-challenging information. Yet, the processing of such information may not be based on its merits, but informed by one's political orientation. Because partisans are ideologically motivated, any information challenging partisan beliefs is more likely to be met with skepticism.

The underlying mechanism of selective belief is thus informed by partisanship. Partisans are more likely to believe in information congruent with their partisanship, in the form of misinformation that presents either their preferred candidate in a good light or the opposition candidate in a bad light. The concept of selective belief could also be explained from the perspective of motivated reasoning, which posits that individuals are motivated to process and evaluate information that is congruent with their ideological position (Kunda, 1990). In this case, motivation affects the process of reasoning to support one's prior belief, attitudes, behavior, and decisions (Kunda, 1990). Hence, regardless of the scientific validity of information, individuals are predisposed to support or reject information. Accurate information is less important for partisans than the content of information that is in line with their ideological coherence and inclinations. We therefore hypothesize that:

H1: Partisanship will be associated with selective belief in political misinformation.

Empirical Background

The 2019 Indonesia election campaign was considered a rematch because both candidates—President Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto—who fought for the 2014 election were again running against each other. Both candidates deployed populist rhetoric to appeal to voters. Anticipating that the campaign could be highly polarized, both President Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi) and his challenger, Prabowo Subianto, walked hand-in-hand during an event held in Jakarta on September 23, 2018, to show their commitment for a clean campaign; they vowed to combat hoaxes and ethnic, religious, racial, and ideological sentiments during the campaign period ("Don't Believe the Hype," 2019). The country's General Elections Commission (KPU) also took several measures to ensure fair elections. For example, with Law No. 7/2017, KPU ensures that government employees cannot participate in political campaigns (Ramdhani, 2018). Alongside the Election Oversight Body (Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, Bawaslu), the KPU removed 647,464 names to ensure that the final voter list was free of errors (Irwan, 2018). Despite these attempts, the 2019 election campaigns were more polarized than the 2014 national elections, with supporters of both sides attempting to spread misinformation and hoaxes. Although both candidates claimed to focus on economic and development issues, there was rampant use of religion and racial and divisive issues by their followers to target voters. Jokowi's ideology was primarily centered on the theme of Indonesia Maju (Indonesia moving forward) and economic development, whereas Prabowo contested the claim of economic growth and proclaimed he would be "making Indonesia great again."

Considering that Indonesia has been the second-top performer among the Group of Twenty (G20) emerging economies, with an average growth of 5% during Jokowi's presidential term (Sipahutar, 2019), it was unlikely that Prabowo could leverage the issue of economic development to defeat Jokowi. Instead, his opposition party targeted the issue of Islam to sway Jokowi's supporters and to garner support from undecided Muslim Indonesians. During Prabowo's rally speech on January 13, 2019, he vowed to protect religious groups and organizations that uphold the state ideology of Pancasila (Yuniar, 2019). This strategic move might have been in response to the 212 movements that resulted from the anti-Ahok protests in 2016, when Basuki Purnama or Ahok, Jokowi's then ally, blasphemously implied that the Quran contained lies (Cochrane, 2017). Although President Jokowi was eventually reelected, securing 55.5% of votes versus 44.5% of votes secured by Prabowo, the election campaign revealed a vital shift in Indonesian politics.

Disinformation Campaign During the 2019 Indonesian Election

Several types of disinformation campaigns circulated during the 2019 Indonesian elections. Because the majority of the disinformation campaigns were targeted at the incumbent Jokowi, we included four of the most widely circulated misinformation rumors against Jokowi: (1) "Joko Widodo (Jokowi) belongs to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)"; (2) "Joko Widodo (Jokowi) is of Chinese descent"; (3) "Hundreds of thousands of illegal foreign workers from China entered Indonesia"; and (4) "There are seven containers from China. Each of them has 10 million ballots for the presidential election that have been punched for candidate Joko Widodo-KH. Ma'ruf Amin." KH. Ma'ruf Amin, an Islamic cleric and Indonesian Ulema Council leader was Jokowi's vice-presidential running mate. We also included one widely circulated misinformation post against Prabowo in our analysis: "Prabowo Subianto was involved in the case of kidnapping democracy activists during the 1997–1998 period."

Misinformation 1 and 2: Jokowi Is Communist and of Chinese descent

President Jokowi was alleged to have links with the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and was projected as a sympathizer of communism. Numerous messages circulating online showed doctored images of Jokowi at a 1965 PKI rally and discussed Jokowi's pro-China stance, implying, among other things, communist sentiments and Jokowi's intentions to apologize to families of communists harmed in the 1965–1966 mass killings.

For historical reasons, the issue of communism, often referred to as "Red Scare" (the fear of the potential rise of communism) or "the latent danger of communism," is largely viewed negatively in Indonesian society. Between 1965 and 1966, after a failed coup attempt, more than 500,000 people were killed in anticommunist operations by then Major General Suharto. This discourse of the dangers of communism was deployed throughout President Suharto's New Order regime (1966–1998) and later. Groups critical of the authoritarian nation-state developmental project were accused of being "*komunis*" (communist) (Aspinall, 2005; Wieringa, 2002). In post-Suharto Indonesia, rumors about the "rise of communism" in Indonesia have flared up, with more conservative groups such as Front Pembela Islam (Islam Defender Front) labeling diverse progressive groups as communists. Anticommunism sentiment started to reemerge during President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's term (2004–2014; Miller, 2018).

This sentiment materialized when anticommunist groups such as the Indonesian Anti-Communist Front (FAKI) were formed and entered electoral politics. FAKI openly supported Prabowo in 2014 by establishing Masyarakat Pendukung Prabowo Presiden, Society of Supporters of Prabowo for President (MP3) to campaign for Prabowo's presidency (Miller, 2018). It was not surprising, then, that the issue of communism was used against Jokowi in the 2014 and 2019 election campaigns. In our survey, close to 33% of respondents admitted that they heard that Jokowi belongs to the PKI, but only 3.3% of the respondents believed the story (Figure 1).

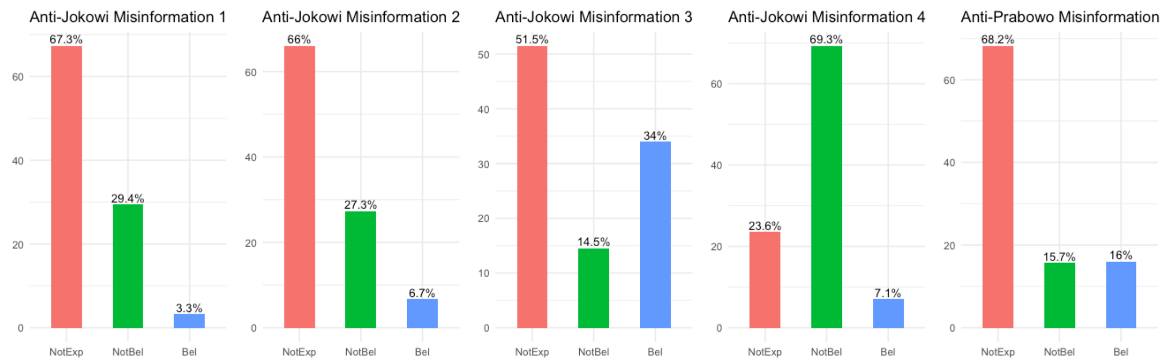

Figure 1. Exposure versus belief in misinformation (N=1,820). Note. NotExp = not exposed to misinformation; NotBel = exposed to misinformation, but did not believe it; Bel = exposed to misinformation and believed it.

The disinformation campaign against Jokowi also spread misinformation that Jokowi was born of a Christian parent, trying to project him as anti-Islamic. Since 2014, when Jokowi took office, he has been surrounded by several controversies related to religion, which helped create the narrative that Jokowi is anti-Islamic. Alfian Tanjung, a religious preacher who spreads radical sermons through YouTube, was imprisoned for hate speech in 2018 after he claimed that Jokowi is a communist and of Chinese descent (Saputra, 2018). Our survey shows that nearly 34% respondents heard that Jokowi was born of a Christian parent, but only 6.7% respondents believed it (Figure 1).

Misinformation 3 and 4: Foreign Influence and Chinese Workers

The issue of foreign influence in the election was raised by both the Jokowi and Prabowo camps. In early January, three months before the election, Prabowo's supporters spread misinformation on social media that seven containers of punched ballots from China for Jokowi had been kept secret; as a result, two suspects were arrested.

On February 2, 2019, Jokowi accused a campaign team of using "Russian propaganda" and employing a "foreign consultant," similar to what President Donald Trump did. Jokowi said, "There's a campaign team that has been preparing . . . Russian propaganda, which constantly spews . . . slander, sins and hoaxes" (Soeriaatmadja, 2019, para. 3). Although Jokowi did not name the campaign team, this was widely interpreted as referring to Prabowo, who was the only other contender. The primary strategy of Jokowi's use of the term *foreign influence* was to attack Prabowo by convincing people that he was supported by foreign propaganda to create instability within the country. This was a strategy of counterpropaganda, in which Jokowi attempted to

twist Prabowo's accusation that he was a "foreign puppet" by telling the public that Prabowo was in fact the foreign puppet because he worked very closely with a Russian consultant. This counterpropaganda by Jokowi was targeted at his supporters not only to advance his credibility, but also to win over undecided voters.

Interestingly, the accusation by Jokowi prompted the Russian embassy in Jakarta to issue a statement that "Russia is not to intervene in domestic affairs and electoral processes of foreign countries, including Indonesia, our close friend and important partner" (Agence France-Presse, 2019, para. 3). The statement from the Russian embassy indicates that the issue had gained wider visibility. Later, Jokowi clarified that the term *Russian propaganda* was only used to refer to Prabowo's propaganda campaign strategy and had nothing to do with the Russian government (Soeriaatmadja, 2019). Yet, Jokowi had already created confusion and misled the public, which is evident from the statement from the Russian embassy.

Similarly, misinformation was spread that illegal foreign workers from China had entered Indonesia. This information was spread to undermine the legitimacy of the Jokowi government by demonstrating his permissiveness toward Chinese foreign workers, who could threaten the job security of local Indonesians. Our survey showed that only 8% of the respondents believed the misinformation about the Chinese ballots. On misinformation about Jokowi's liberal approach to Chinese workers, only 7.1% of our respondents had heard and believed the misinformation, and 69.3% respondents did not believe it (Figure 1).

Misinformation 5: Prabowo's Military Record

The smear campaign against Jokowi also could be attributed to his humble upbringing. Unlike Prabowo, Jokowi does not have an elite military or political background. Prabowo, on the other hand, is a former commander of Indonesia's Special Forces Command (Komando Pasukan Khusus, Kopassus). Moreover, conservative Islamic groups view Jokowi's policies as overly liberal, promoting a more capitalist and Western-style economy (Watson, 2019). Because of the instrumental role that the military played in the forming of modern Indonesia, conservative groups tend to have high trust in the military and prefer leaders with a more established and traditional background, such as Prabowo (Mietzner, 2013).

To undermine the advantage of Prabowo's military background in influencing public opinion, many of Jokowi's supporters highlighted Prabowo's involvement in military operations and the kidnapping case of democracy activists during the 1997–1998 period. As indicated earlier, Prabowo was a Kopassus commander and later, in 1998, in the Army Strategic Reserve Command (Komando Cadangan Strategis Angkatan Darat, or Kostrad). It was in his latter role as commander of Kostrad that Prabowo was accused of being involved in the shooting of student activists in Trisakti on May 12, 1998, and the kidnapping of 23 activists the same month (Aspinall, 2015), which cost him his military career. Our survey shows that close to 32% of the respondents had heard the story, but only 16% believed that Prabowo was involved in military operations and the kidnapping case of democracy activists during the 1997–1998 period (Figure 1).

Method

This article is based on a cross-sectional, nationally representative pre-poll survey (*N* = 1,820) to analyze how voters perceived disinformation.[3] The respondents were selected with a multistage random sampling method, proportionally distributed over the 34 provinces across Indonesia. Of the total sample, 1,583 (87%) were the original respondents, and 237 (13%) were substitute respondents,[4] who generally had profiles similar to the original cases. Selected respondents were interviewed face-to-face by trained interviewers. The interviews were conducted from March 22 to 29, just before the election, which was held on April 17, 2019.

Dependent Variables

Selective belief. To measure the prevalence of selective belief, we used self-reported measures of belief on five different pieces of political misinformation; four were targeted against the incumbent president, Jokowi, and one was targeted against the challenger, Prabowo Subianto. The operationalization of selective belief works on the premise that party identification will be strongly associated with belief in misinformation. Each dependent variable measuring misinformation was coded 1/0; 1 indicates that respondents believe in the misinformation, and 0 indicates that respondents do not believe in the misinformation (see Appendix for question wording).

Independent Variables

We used two independent variables. Use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp) to follow and engage in politics was coded on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *daily*). The probability to vote (PTV) for each candidate was measured on a 10-point scale, with 1 indicating *would never vote for the candidate*, and 10 indicating *extremely likely to vote for the respective candidate* (PTV_Jokowi: *M* = 7.06, *SD* = 2.68; PTV_Prabowo: *M* = 6.01, *SD* = 2.85). We used the PTV measure that originated with the European Election Studies rather than the typical vote intention question because it enabled respondents to place themselves more or less close to each candidate or party (Van der Eijk, Van der Brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006).

Control Variables

We included four demographics as control variables: education (coded low to high on a 10-point scale, from 1 = *never went to school* to 10 = *finished college or above*; *M* = 4.74, *SD* = 2.37); income (coded low to high on a 15-point scale, from 1 = *less than 200 thousand rupiah* to 15 = *10 to 15 million*

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[3] The base sample for the national survey was 1,220 respondents. We added an oversample of 600 respondents in West Java, bringing the total number of respondents to 1,820. For the record, additional samples were not separate from base samples, but were added from existing national and provincial base samples. The weighting was made proportionally at the provincial level.

[4] These 237 respondents (13%) were unavailable to be contacted for various reasons, namely, "not accessible within the agreed on field duration" (34%) (i.e., working out of the area or going to school outside the region), "refused to be interviewed" (15%), "being too old" (3%), "very sick" (6%), and "other" (19%).

rupiah; *M* = 8.08, *SD* = 3.58); age (17–85, coded young to old on a 6-point scale, from 1 = *young* to 6 = *old*; *M* = 39.0, *SD* = 14.52); and gender (50.7% female).

Results

Descriptive statistics for the independent variables are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables (N = 1,820).

	n	*M*	*SD*	*SE*
Education	1,820	4.744	2.372	0.056
Income	1,820	8.077	3.583	0.084
Facebook_Political	779	2.164	1.460	0.052
Twitter_Political	778	1.161	0.622	0.022
WhatsApp_Political	782	2.205	1.420	0.051
PTV_Jokowi	1,587	7.052	2.632	0.066
PTV_Prabowo	1,509	6.166	2.739	0.071

The use of Facebook (*M* = 2.16, *SD* = 1.46) and WhatsApp (*M* = 2.20, *SD* = 1.42) for political purposes was much higher than that for Twitter (*M* = 1.16, *SD* = .62). Similarly, respondents were more likely to vote for Jokowi than for Prabowo.

To test the hypothesis and address the research question, we ran five binary logistic regressions in which belief in each piece of misinformation was treated as a binary dependent variable (Table 2). No issue of multicollinearity was detected as shown through the variance inflation factor (VIF) in Table A1 in the Appendix. None of the demographics was significant except for age in Misinformation 4 (that targeted Jokowi) and gender for Misinformation 5 (that targeted Prabowo). The results show that social media use for political purposes was not an important predictor of belief in misinformation except in one case in which the use of Facebook was associated with belief in misinformation against Jokowi (Misinformation 1).

Table 2. Belief in Misinformation, Demographics, and Partisanship (N=1,820).

	Anti-Jokowi Misinformation							
	Misinformation 1		Misinformation 2		Misinformation 3		Misinformation 4	
	OR	*SE*	*OR*	*SE*	*OR*	*SE*	*OR*	*SE*
Female	0.627	0.501	0.659	0.374	0.351	0.265	0.223	0.341
Age	−0.093	0.216	0.097	0.158	−0.192	0.116	−0.342*	0.163
Education	−0.250	0.133	−0.110	0.090	−0.064	0.063	0.034	0.088
Income	−0.016	0.090	0.106	0.075	0.059	0.043	0.053	0.064
Facebook_Political	0.154	0.159	−0.009	0.135	0.168	0.101	−0.145	0.136
Twitter_Political	−0.308	0.418	−0.237	0.312	0.045	0.192	0.109	0.249
WhatsApp_Political	0.128	0.171	0.211	0.133	−0.162	0.097	0.200	0.129
PTV_Jokowi	−0.318*	0.127	−0.209*	0.095	−0.192**	0.074	−0.157	0.084
PTV_Prabowo	0.247	0.129	0.260**	0.101	0.065	0.068	0.180*	0.091

AIC	149.08	220.28	397.82	273.76
BIC	183.59	254.57	436.79	319.80
Log-likelihood	−64.54 (*df* = 9)	−100.14 (*df* = 9)	−188.91 (*df* = 9)	−125.87 (*df* = 10)
Pseudo R^2 (*Cragg-Uhler*)	0.67	0.68	0.64	0.75

Note. OR = odds ratios; SE = standard errors; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.
**p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 2 (continued). Belief in Misinformation, Demographics, and Partisanship (N = 1,820).

	Anti-Prabowo Misinformation	
	OR	*SE*
Female	−0.574*	0.289
Age	0.149	0.127
Education	0.074	0.075
Income	−0.018	0.055
Facebook_Political	0.240*	0.110
Twitter_Political	0.016	0.181
WhatsApp_Political	0.092	0.108
PTV_Jokowi	0.120	0.076
PTV_Prabowo	−0.227**	0.074
AIC	330.42	
BIC	366.06	
Log-likelihood	−155.21(*df* = 9)	
Pseudo R^2 (*Cragg-Uhler*)	0.66	

Note. OR = odds ratios; SE = standard errors; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.
**p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.
Note. Misinformation 1 = Joko Widodo (Jokowi) belongs to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).
Misinformation 2 = Joko Widodo (Jokowi) is of Chinese descent.
Misinformation 3 = Hundreds of thousands of illegal foreign workers from China have entered Indonesia.
Misinformation 4 = There are seven containers from China. Each one has 10 million ballots for the presidential election that have been punched for candidate Joko Widodo - KH. Ma'ruf Amin.
Misinformation against Prabowo = Prabowo Subianto was involved in the case of kidnapping democracy activists during the 1997–1998 period.

We also found that partisanship was the most important predictor of believing or not believing in each piece of misinformation, as seen in Table 2. For the first two pieces of misinformation against Jokowi, voters inclined to vote for Jokowi were significantly less likely to believe them, and they did not believe Misinformation 3. Those who would probably vote for Prabowo were significantly more likely to believe Misinformation 2 and Misinformation 4. Regarding misinformation about Prabowo, people likely to vote for him were significantly less likely to believe the misinformation. (Average marginal effects of all models are provided in Appendix.)

Discussion

This article shows an association among social media use for political purposes, partisanship, and belief in disinformation circulated during the run-up to the 2019 Indonesian election. We noticed that the average level of exposure to various forms of disinformation was high, but the average level of belief in those posts with disinformation was comparatively low. After controlling for gender, age, education, and income, we found that the political use of social media in general was not associated with belief in misinformation. This is not surprising because recent empirical evidence suggests that a very small number of people on social media are exposed to misinformation (Allen et al., 2020).

Importantly, the study shows that partisanship is strongly associated with belief in misinformation targeted against candidates. People's belief in misinformation depended on whether it was targeted against their own candidate or the opposing candidate. This could be explained through the phenomenon of selective belief. Drawing on the literature on selective exposure (Mutz, 2006; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Stroud, 2008), selective sharing (Barberá et al., 2015; Shin & Thorson, 2017), and partisan-motivated reasoning (Bolsen et al., 2014; Kunda, 1990), we found that selective belief could also be motivated by ideological affinity.

If people reject or accept information that is inconsistent with their party affinity, this could foreclose the option of deliberation and lead to further polarization in society. Although rejecting misinformation is the correct thing to do, such rejection should not be driven by partisanship. Unlike the case of selective exposure, people were exposed to information from the opposing side. While democratic theorists argue that exposure to countervailing information is important for deliberation to take place (Mutz, 2006), the issue of selective belief could hamper such deliberative processes because partisan political identity is consistent with their belief.

At the same time, misinformation could play a strategic role in political choice and may have influenced the final voting decision. The issue of the influence of misinformation in voting decisions has been subject of debates (see Guess et al., 2019), and we cannot discount its effect on citizens' political judgement. Several countries have voiced concerns about disinformation and treat the phenomenon as a national security threat.

Although these disinformation campaigns were drawn from a local cultural context, we noticed the presence of certain features that are also found in developed democracies—for example, the use of foreign influence and identity politics. The Russian government has been accused of attempting to influence national elections in many countries, including Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the U.S., as well as the Brexit campaign (Helmus et al., 2018). A similar concern about the attempt by both the Chinese and the Russian governments to influence the Indonesian national election was raised by the supporters of both presidential candidates. The use of identity politics to mobilize voters was more visible with the assertion that President Jokowi is of Chinese descent or was born of a Christian parent. Given that Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, with 88% of its population being followers of Islam, this disinformation campaign was bound to create disenchantment among potential voters.

The deployment of disinformation can destabilize the pillars of democracy and affect the electoral process. This is because disinformation campaigns often target the legitimacy of the democratic process by

questioning the neutrality of democratic institutions. For example, the neutrality of the electoral commission has been questioned through disinformation campaigns in various countries, including Indonesia. Similarly, the disinformation campaign leads to "systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows" by affecting the news consumption process (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 124). In the context of the U.S., a Freedom House (2019) report highlights the "erosion of public confidence in the mainstream media" (para. 11), while similar trends can be discerned in other democracies.

To fight against disinformation, the Indonesian government established a "war room" by recruiting engineers to debunk misinformation and hoaxes. In addition, the government launched a website for citizens to report suspected misinformation and to verify if a particular claim is true (Bloomberg, 2018). These initiatives, though commendable, were also advanced because of inherent political interests. Because most of the misinformation and hoaxes were targeted against the Jokowi-led government, establishing an institutionalized mechanism helped the incumbent to use public resources to fight the disinformation campaign. Notwithstanding the growing amount of disinformation in the run-up to the 2019 Indonesian national election and a highly polarized campaign, there is a strong faith in Indonesia's democratic institutions. This was reflected in our survey, in which 79% of respondents agreed that "although it is not perfect, democracy is the best system of government for our country."

One policy implication that emerges from our study is paying more attention to the context and the underlying issue driving partisanship and polarization in society instead of blaming social media. Partisanship, not political uses of social media, is the most important determinant of belief in misinformation. To address the issue of growing partisanship, the government may look into the local factors that could be associated with increasing polarization in society. In Indonesia's case, cutting down the presidential threshold could help reduce the growing political polarization in the country. In 2014 and 2019, as stipulated in Article 222 of Law No. 7 of 2017, political parties or a coalition of parties (inside the House of Representatives [DPR]) must have secured at least 20% of the number of seats in the DPR or obtained 25% of legitimate votes nationally in the previous legislative elections in order to nominate presidential candidates. A high presidential threshold, such as in 2014 and 2019, limits the emergence of alternative candidate pairs, giving voters limited options. As a result, polarization is also increasing, as seen in the 2019 presidential election. Because there are only two candidates, naturally, voters are divided into two camps. The campaign is dominated by issues of identity politics, misinformation, and hoaxes. The reduced presidential threshold would encourage an increase in the number of presidential candidates and promote coalition building.

This research builds on prior studies on selective exposure, selective sharing, and motivated reasoning and suggests that the concept of selective belief plays an important role in following misinformation. We also drew on studies that measured the impact of factors associated with believing misinformation (Martel, Pennycook, & Rand, 2019; Pennycook et al., 2018). Future research may benefit from studying the causal mechanism of whether believing in misinformation actually influences vote choice. One could also test the concept of selective belief beyond self-reported measures of believing misinformation in an experimental setting to establish causality. To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine how social media uses and partisanship are associated with belief in misinformation in a political communication campaign context in a low-income democracy. It contributes to ongoing debates about the influence of

disinformation in electoral politics in a hybrid media environment and provides insights into understanding the potential impact of selective belief on electoral democracies.

The study was conducted in 2019, when the penetration of digital media in Indonesia was low. However, given that the penetration of digital media has been growing in Indonesia in both urban and rural areas, it is crucial to measure how users interact and spread information, both real and fake, obtained from any channel. The study examines disinformation campaigns in a low-income democracy, but such campaigns also resonate with the trends noticed in advanced Western democracies. The concept of selective belief advanced here could be tested in other contexts to further validate its applicability.

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Appendix

Complete Question Wording in English

- Q (Misinformation 1). Do you know or have you heard the news/issue that mentions that Joko Widodo (Jokowi) belongs to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)?
- Q. If "Yes, I know," do you believe the news/issue?
- Q (Misinformation 2). Do you know or have you heard the news/issue that mentions that Joko Widodo (Jokowi) is of Chinese descent?
- Q. If "Yes, I know," do you believe the news/issue?
- Q (Misinformation 3). Do you know or have you heard that hundreds of thousands of illegal foreign workers from China have entered Indonesia?
- Q. If "Yes, I know," do you believe the news/issue?
- Q (Misinformation 4). Many news/issues/opinions are circulating in public related to the upcoming April 17 presidential election. Do you believe or not believe the following news/issues/opinions?
- There are seven containers from China. Each one has 10 million ballots for the presidential election that have been punched for candidate Joko Widodo - KH. Ma'ruf Amin
- 1. Yes, I believe it; 2. No, I do not believe it ; 8. I don't know
- Q (Anti-Prabowo Misinformation). Do you know or have heard the news/issue mentioning that Prabowo Subianto was involved in the kidnapping case of democracy activists during the 1997–1998 period?
- Q. If "Yes, I know," do you believe the news/issue?

Table A1. Multicollinearity Diagnostic for Models Through VIF.

	Anti-Jokowi Misinformation				Anti-Prabowo Misinformation
	Misinformation 1	Misinformation 2	Misinformation 3	Misinformation 4	
	VIF	VIF	VIF	VIF	VIF
Female	1.195	1.122	1.052	1.017	1.024
Age	1.189	1.182	1.111	1.145	1.181
Education	1.275	1.213	1.156	1.197	1.174
Income	1.198	1.219	1.157	1.182	1.159
Facebook_Political	1.245	1.403	1.383	1.319	1.412
Twitter_Political	1.068	1.084	1.084	1.070	1.090
WhatsApp_Political	1.251	1.359	1.353	1.306	1.319
PTV_Jokowi	1.783	1.693	1.765	1.717	1.715
PTV_Prabowo	1.606	1.676	1.760	1.695	1.649

Note: The variance inflation factor (VIF) determines how much the variance of an estimated regression coefficient increases if predictors are correlated. A VIF of 1 indicates that no factors are correlated.

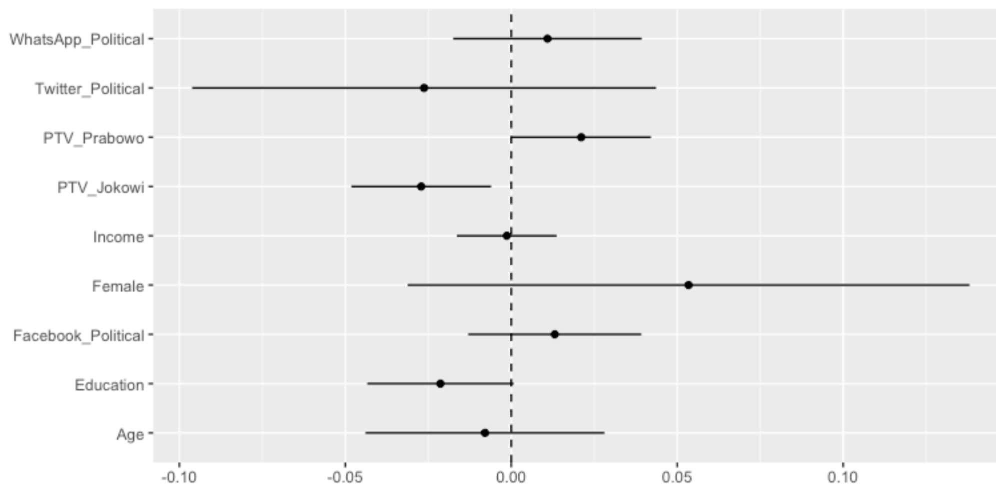

Figure A1a. Average marginal effects on believing in anti-Jokowi misinformation 1.

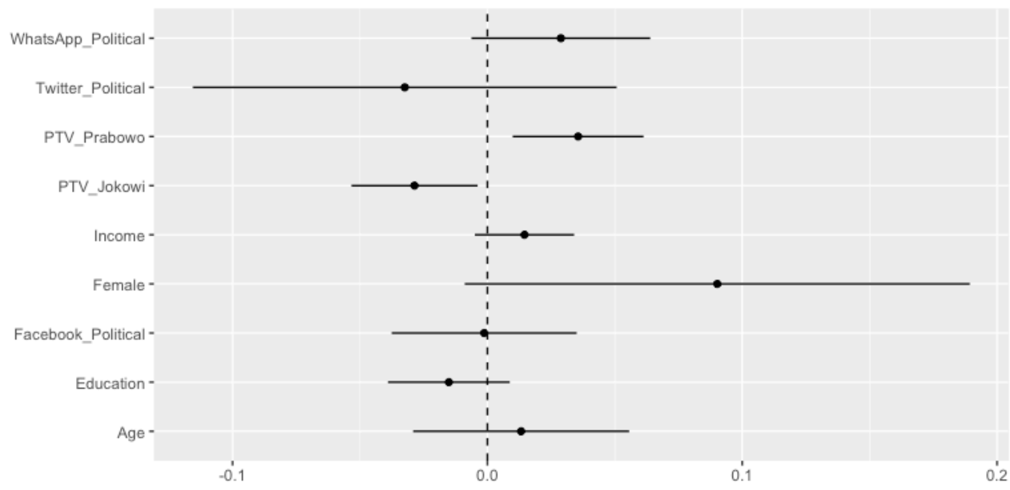

Figure A1b. Average marginal effects on believing in anti-Jokowi misinformation 2.

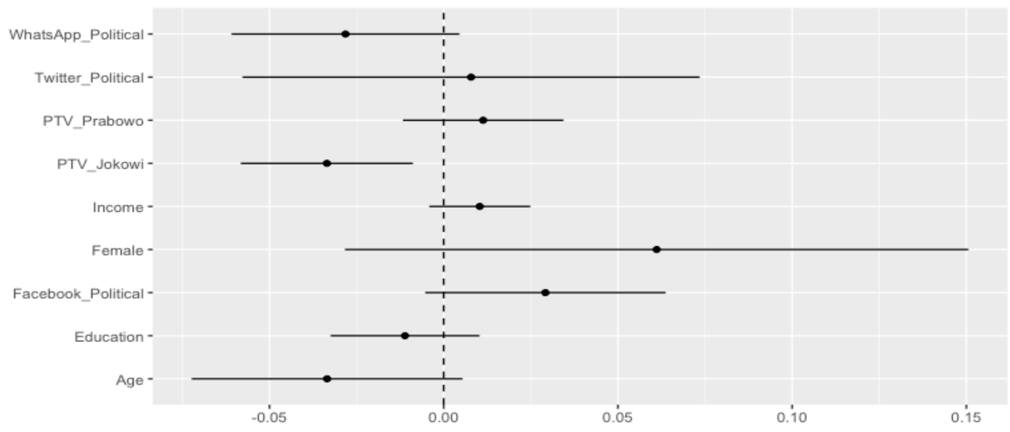

Figure A1c. Average marginal effects on believing in anti-Jokowi misinformation 3.

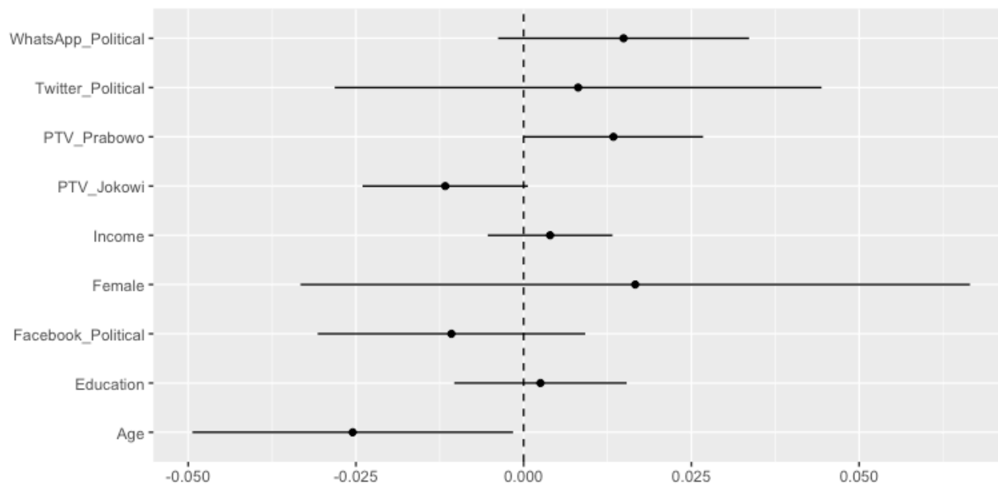

Figure A1d. Average marginal effects on believing in anti-Jokowi misinformation 4.

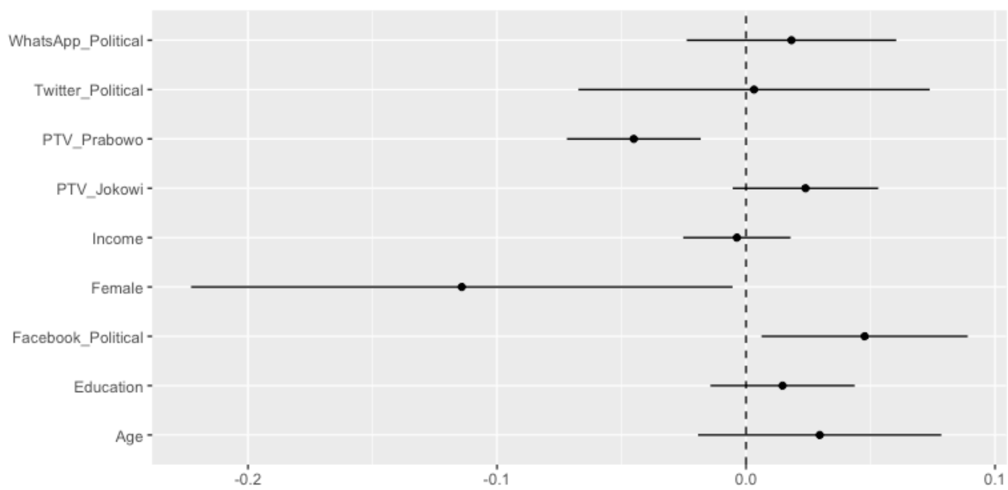

Figure A1e. Average marginal effects on believing in anti-Prabowo misinformation.